

Department of Human Services

Articles in Today's Clips Monday, August 27, 2007

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Foster-care system under scrutiny

Lori Holcomb

The Enquirer

August 26, 2007

It's an hour before dinner and Brian and Kim Gerber's Bedford home is organized madness.

Four teenage girls work an assembly line of washing and drying dishes, two toddlers gnaw on oatmeal cookies and 7-month-old Malakai, or Bubba, threatens the ankles of unsuspecting adults in his rolling walker.

It's noisy, but cheerful. On this night there's laughter around their long kitchen table. Sometimes, it's the only way to cope with the pains of the past.

One of the teens, Brianna, 16, has been in at least 18 homes since entering the foster-care system, five in the past five months.

Another, Kiarre, also 16, lost both her mother and grandmother as a child, and has been through several foster homes. Brian and Kim are the first parents she ever knew as "mom" and "dad."

Kiarre and Brianna have run away from many of their foster homes, including the Gerbers', but now they're intent on staying. Brian and Kim are intent on keeping them; and besides, living with the Gerbers is fun.

"We get to eat whenever we want to eat," Kiarre gushed. The 16-year-old and the other girls recall living in homes where the refrigerator was padlocked at night.

"A lot of foster kids hoard food," Kim Gerber said, referring to the empty wrappers and food she'll find hidden in their rooms and under their beds. "It's from living that past where they're not sure when their next meal is coming, but I eventually break them of it."

By these accounts, the Gerber home embodies the promise of Michigan's

foster-care system: a safe, structured and nurturing home environment for children who have lost or have been removed from their biological parents or custodial adults.

Numerous examples of the system's failure, however, tell a different story. The death of two children in the past two years — 7-year-old Ricky Holland of Williamston and 2-year-old Isaac Lethbridge of Detroit — have sparked debates how to reform the system.

The process, particularly in light of the state's budget crisis, is slow. This week, lawmakers in Lansing wrangled over a GOP plan to privatize more of Michigan's foster care.

At the crux of the issue are the foster parents themselves. The worst examples grab headlines, and foster parents who abuse the system — take in wards simply to receive state money — tarnish the system's image. But foster parents are desperately needed.

"It's a hard job," Kim Gerber said. "If people are getting into this because they think the kids are going to love and respect them, it's not going to happen for a long time down the road."

A STABLE LIFE

Kim, 34, is a third-generation foster parent. Her grandparents housed 33 foster children, adopted seven, and Kim's mother became licensed after Kim left home.

Brian, 39, loves children and specializes in keeping his wife and kids smiling. They have one biological child, Hailee, 8, and a dozen grandchildren.

The Gerbers specialize in working with teenage girls such as Brianna and Kiarre.

"The biggest thing in a kid is stability," Kim Gerber said. "A stable life knowing they're going to get up in the morning, go to school, come home, have dinner and have a family."

Children who endured years of neglect, abuse and instability often harbor hostile attitudes and behavioral issues, said Jim Cochrane, a manager at the

Calhoun County Department of Human Services.

"They're a difficult population to work with because of their life experiences," Cochrane said.

Brianna and Kiarre recounted examples of intentionally saying or doing something disrespectful so the foster parent would ask to have the child removed. That game doesn't work with Kim.

"I tell them when they're bad, 'That's OK, go ahead. Be bad. Because you ain't going nowhere and neither am I,'" Kim said.

"If I were to move these girls for every problem they had, I would have moved them 150 times," she said. "They test you and your boundaries to see how you're going to react."

The girls attest to their own progress living with the Gerbers. Although Kiarre and Brianna won't discuss their past, they are letting down their walls. Several weeks ago, Kiarre wore a skirt — albeit over shorts — at home for the first time.

They wouldn't discuss their reasons for the change, other than to say they now have at least one less reason to be afraid.

"Before here I didn't trust any male, and I still don't," Brianna said pointing a finger at Brian. "He's the only one I trust."

MORE BAD THAN GOOD

Michigan's foster-care system is the seventh largest system in the country and ranks in the bottom 12 states for percentage of funds used to help foster children.

For comparison, the state spends about \$1.9 billion on corrections, more than a fifth of the general fund, and pays about \$30,000 to house a prisoner. Alternately, it spends about \$240 million in foster-care payments and salaries for 706 workers, or about \$9,700 per child.

In 2006, New York-based Children's Rights sued in Michigan on behalf of its 19,000 foster children. Earlier this month, lawyers for both sides agreed to have an independent expert examine a random sampling of children's case

files to try to identify problems in the child welfare system.

Many of those problems have been well-publicized. According to Kids Count, the number of children who are wards of the state more than doubled between 1994 — when there were 2,972 — and 2006, when there were 6,292.

Sara Bartosz, Children's Rights lead counsel on the case, says in addition to the state wards, about 7,000 children are placed in the homes of unlicensed relatives. In most cases, they do not receive state funding or services, leaving the children vulnerable.

As a guardian ad litem attorney, a lawyer appointed to represent the interests of minors, Karen Cook has worked with hundreds of children, parents and agencies in the foster-care system.

In her experience, she's seen more bad than good.

"I've spent 20 years in a system that's incompetent, with a lot of corruption and wasted tax dollars," said Cook, who was named the 2004 Child Advocate of the Year by the Children's Law Section of the State Bar of Michigan.

She said she believes many of the problems lie in the licensing process.

"The criteria for being a licensed foster parent is breathing," she said. "Agencies love to license people who don't ask questions."

License applicants to DHS must be between 18 and 65. Other requirements include a background check, three character references, a training session and an interview with a DHS worker.

Private agencies such as Starr Commonwealth may require other licensing standards. Marty Mitchell, CEO and president of Starr Commonwealth, said Starr looks for people with good morals who care about children's well being. With any process involving human nature, however, he said it's not perfect.

"I would be the first to say it's not infallible, but this is not something we take lightly," Mitchell said. "We work very hard to make sure before a family receives a single child, that the children will receive the care they

deserve."

LACK OF OVERSIGHT

Thursday, the state Senate approved a controversial bill that would put 20 percent more foster cases in the hands of private agencies.

Currently, 40 percent of Michigan's DHS foster-care services are privatized. Sen. Bill Hardiman, R- Kentwood, sponsored Senate bill 232 and said it will improve the private agencies' accountability using performance-based contracts, requiring national accreditation and giving the state more time for oversight.

Mitchell said he believes combining the strengths of the private and public sectors would create the best situation for foster children.

"It's not about who can do it better because both have their strong points," he said. "The public sector would do a great job at what it does best — managing and oversight— and the private sector in service delivery."

There are many who say otherwise.

"I think it's a disaster," Cook said. She said she's seen too many situations where contracts become more important than the children and kids linger in foster care for years so agencies could continue to draw funding for the child.

Many private agencies also fail to provide the basic service and monitoring requirements to identify problems with foster-care homes, she said.

Mitchell said that ongoing assessments, 24-hour availability and weekly or biweekly visits help ensure that proper care is provided, but many agencies don't hold case workers to these standards. DHS reported in March 2006 that at least 31 percent of the state's foster children were not receiving monthly visits.

Cook said the state needs more workers and structural change to improve, and medical and health benefits wouldn't hurt — at least 40 percent of children in state custody don't receive basic preventative screenings.

Medicaid covers foster children, but finding providers who accept Medicaid

is difficult, so foster parents often pay for the care themselves. Although they receive money for food and clothes, it's not enough in her view.

According to DHS, the state pays between \$14 and \$18 per day and an additional allotment between \$5 and \$18 for each child, depending on age and level of needed medical care. Parents also receive a \$25 allowance for each child at Christmas and \$210 to \$500 clothing supplement depending on age and need.

"Could you live off it? Yes, if you lived in very minimal conditions," Kim Gerber said.

DHS reports that fewer than 30 percent of all Michigan's foster children return home within 12 months of removal. The national average is 76 percent or more.

FINDING HOME

For children who cannot return to their families, adoption is the best option. Adoption has meant a life change for the Gerbers' adopted children. As soon as they adopted Brittney, teachers commented on how much she changed for the better, Brian Gerber said.

"They know they're not going anywhere; it's family," Kim Gerber said. "They lose all the court background, lose all the caseworkers, all the judges — they're just like a normal child."

With foster children, they never know from one day to the next if Child Protective Services is going to show up on their doorstep to take them away. If not for the Gerbers' love, Kiarre, Brianna and Cassie say they would have run away or been put in a residential program long ago.

"We just tell them everyday we love them," Kim said. "We laugh, we cry and we live together."

The girls say they don't want to leave, and the Gerbers say that's fine by them.

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Article published Aug 26, 2007

EDITORIAL

Foster care system is in crisis

Michigan's foster care system is in crisis.

That's not a new revelation, but it bears repeating, because in spite of several deaths and a growing record of failure, we're stuck.

On Thursday, Senate Republicans passed a bill that would put 20 percent more foster cases in the hands of private agencies.

Currently, 40 percent of Michigan's DHS foster care service are privatized. Sen. Bill Hardiman, R- Kentwood, sponsored SB 232 and said it will improve the private agencies' accountability using performance-based contracts, requiring national accreditation and giving the state more time for oversight.

Candidly, we're skeptical. Although there are certainly responsible agencies in Michigan who do a good job with their caseloads, there are those who don't, and we don't see any consensus around a strategy to impose accountability on the system.

The nightmare here is that this isn't just another bureaucracy in need of state reform; this is agency charged with protecting our youngest and most vulnerable citizens.

The Department of Human Services has investigated the deaths of nearly 70 deaths of foster children since 2004, and while the majority of those were reportedly from natural causes, more than dozen were homicides.

Throughout the system is evidence of neglect:

- As many as 31 percent of the state's 19,000 foster children don't see a caseworker each month.
- At least 40 percent of children in state custody don't receive basic preventative health screenings.

The solutions aren't that complicated. The state needs to reduce caseloads, add staff to provide more oversight and give more support to foster families.

We don't need a partisan debate over the merits of privatization to solve the state's budget crisis. Rather, we need a unified front to stand up and say we won't tolerate this any more. After widely publicized deaths of two children in the past two years, we're still waiting.

As depressing and infuriating as this issue is, we need not look far to find inspiration for what is possible. The home of Brian and Kim Gerber, featured on today's front page, embodies the promise of Michigan's foster care system: a safe, structured and nurturing home environment for children who have lost or have been removed from their biological parents or custodial adults.

Some 40 foster children have journeyed through their loving home, of which a dozen have come to stay as adopted family members. It's not always easy, and it's not always successful, but it's family.

Says Kim, "We just tell them everyday we love them. We laugh, we cry and we live together."

It seems to us there are plenty of examples in the system of people who put the welfare of children ahead of everything.

The least we can do is find a way to help them.

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Article published Aug 26, 2007

MURDER SUSPECT SAYS HER STATEMENTS TO POLICE SHOULD BE THROWN OUT

'I was so out of it'

By TIFFANY L. PARKS
Staff Writer

Carol Poole says she has a good reason why the courts should suppress the statements she made to police after her foster daughter, Allison Newsman, was rushed to the hospital: "I was so out of it."

Poole, who has been charged with felony murder, first-degree child abuse and involuntary manslaughter in the death of the 2-year-old child, took the stand Friday during an evidence hearing in Detroit.

"I did not have the presence of mind that day to voice logical thoughts," she said. While admitting to making up three lies of how Allison got the injuries that caused her death in September, Poole, 42, testified that she was unable to think clearly when she spoke with Canton detectives.

"My state of mind was do what they tell me to do," she said, adding that her only focus was on being with Allison in the hospital.

Poole's attorney, Mark Satawa, previously called a forensic psychologist who testified that she had "emotionally and psychologically collapsed" before giving her statement to police.

During her testimony Friday, Poole's voice quivered and cracked at moments and she told the court that she was nervous.

Allison's paternal grandfather, Kenneth Newman, sighed sarcastically when Poole said she was suicidal after the toddler's death.

"I didn't want to live my life without her," Poole said.

Newman's wife, Debbie, wiped away tears when Poole began to talk about Allison's injuries.

"She's trying to cover her guilt," she said. "This is all a big act."

When Satawa asked why she signed and initialed a form waiving her Miranda rights, Poole answered, "because they told me to."

Under cross examination, Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Jerry Dorsey IV attempted to refute Poole's claim that she felt threatened by the police by saying she had been allowed to use her cell phone while in the back of a police cruiser and that she had been free to go home that night.

Poole said she offered multiple stories to police because she wanted to end the questioning as soon as possible.

"I wasn't thinking," she said. "I wanted to get out of that room."

Poole offered four stories for Allison's injuries including that she had bumped her head in bed, fell from a vanity and fell in a bathtub. The last story she told, which she says is the truth, is that she and Allison were playing "whirlybird" when the child accidentally flew over a second-story balcony.

Wayne County Circuit Court Judge Ulysses W. Boykin will hear arguments from Satawa and Dorsey regarding the police statements on Sept. 21.

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Article published Aug 23, 2007

Death of a child: Long before Allison Newman died in foster care, her real parents struggled through a life of drugs and crime

By TIFFANY L. PARKS
Staff Writer

When an 18-year-old Anne Hirsch licked the stamp to her first jailhouse letter to Kenny Newman and threw it in the mail, she set the downward spiral of her life in motion.

The young couple's roller coaster relationship, which was riddled with drug abuse and breakups, hit bottom in September with the death of their youngest daughter, Allison, 2.

Carol Poole, one half of the Canton couple that had been granted custody of the happy, brown-eyed child, has been charged in connection with her death and is set to return to court Friday for a hearing.

While palming a picture of his angelic granddaughter laid out in a coffin, Craig Hirsch, Anne's father, stares at a wall in his Canton apartment as if it holds the answers to his questions.

"I knew something was going to happen because they weren't done with the crack cocaine," he says blankly. "I just never knew it would be a death."

Hirsch said he isn't sure who gave Anne the contact information for Newman, then 20, in 1998. And he still can't pinpoint the exact reason she began writing him but says he believes it's because they are both deaf.

Although Hirsch was leery of Newman's interaction with his daughter, he gave him the benefit of the doubt when he was released from jail later that year.

"I thought he was a nice guy," Hirsch said. "He was clean cut and he brought her a rose everyday."

'SHE WAS A GOOD KID'

At that time, Anne, one of Hirsch's seven children, was a "good kid" who had always conquered her physical limitations, including cerebral palsy, and had thrived in cross country running and performed in student plays.

Hirsch, who raised Anne, now 27, on his own, offers a slight smile as he hands over a stack of her old report cards.

"She didn't smoke and didn't drink," he said. "All she and her sister did was play with each other's hair."

Within months of meeting Newman in person, Hirsch was pregnant with the couple's first daughter, Chrissy.

"I remember taking them all to Red Lobster when Chrissy was about three years old," Hirsch said. "They had some money in the bank and they were about to move into a trailer. That's the last time I remember them doing well."

Soon afterward, Hirsch says the couple spun out of control when they began doing drugs together.

"I had retired and went to Florida, but I had to come right back when I found out she was doing drugs," he said. "I was only gone three months."

UNABLE TO CHANGE

Anne, who has entered rehab nine times, made an effort to kick cocaine when she got pregnant with Allison, Hirsch said.

When she was around six months old, Allison was placed in foster care and eventually ended up with the Pooles. She had previously lived with her older sister and paternal grandparents, Kenneth and Debbie Newman, in Westland. Hirsch said health problems prevented him from taking the child.

"I remember (the paternal grandfather) stating that he was glad Allison hadn't been placed in the ghetto, but was in Canton where everything is supposed to be la-dee-dah," Hirsch said. "I don't think any of us knew this would happen."

The Newmans, who have been at all of Poole's court appearances, have said they will hold off on comments until Poole's trial is over.

After Allison moved into the Poole's home, Anne appeared to want to turn her life around but Newman, now 29, was back in jail. He has an extensive criminal record, dating back to 1994.

Having entered a plea on four charges, including fleeing a police officer, assault with a dangerous weapon and receiving and concealing stolen property, Newman is in custody in a state prison in Jackson with a maximum release date of 2015.

Hirsch said his daughter and Newman are no longer in a relationship.

When Allison died, Hirsch said any of Anne's plans to get clean were gone. He believes it has been about a year since she's seen her oldest daughter, now 7. The girl, who left a note in her little sister's casket to tell God she said hello, still lives with her paternal grandparents.

"I have to go and hunt her down," Hirsch said. "I stand outside the drug houses with my camcorder and I wait. I know what time they get going."

Estimating that he's hit the streets more than 100 times to find Anne, Hirsch has gotten beat up and robbed in the process.

As he throws out a recent photograph that shows his left eye swollen shut and bruised, Hirsch said Anne mostly appears numb to Allison's death but will cry or get mad about the situation if she's high.

"If it were me, I'd be totally heartbroken if this happened to one of my kids," he said. "But with her, it doesn't last long."

TRIAL WON'T BRING HER BACK

Poole, 42, is accused of causing Allison's death when the child flew over a second-floor balcony during a game of "whirlybird."

Although the Canton woman has insisted the child's death was an accident, police say she gave them multiple explanations for Allison's injuries, which included a skull fracture. She has been charged with felony murder, first-degree child abuse and involuntary manslaughter.

Hirsch says he can only speculate about Poole's guilt but doesn't believe her acquittal or conviction will change anything.

"Nobody is going to win," he said. "Allison will still be gone and none of us know for sure what took place in that house."

After an unsuccessful attempt to visit Chrissy last month, Hirsch said Anne went off on yet another drug binge.

"My life is pure hell and I'm tired," he said flatly. "I gave my undivided attention to raising her, it's not like I was off somewhere doing my own thing. She was trying to fit in and got in over her head."

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The News-Herald

A Heritage Newspaper

Father sought after biting infant

By Jackie Harrison-Martin
, The News-Herald

BROWNSTOWN TWP. — Police say it is imperative that they find 23-year-old Javante Chrishon Beard immediately and get him off the streets.

A warrant for his arrest on second- and third-degree child-abuse charges was issued after he allegedly bit his 5-month-old daughter's cheeks and shoulders, leaving deep teeth marks and bruises.

Beard also faces the charges as a fourth-degree habitual offender.

The incident occurred Aug. 16 and was reported the next day by the child's mother.

Since reporting the incident to police, the child's mother and cousin have been receiving threats from Beard, according to police Lt. Robert Grant. He also said Beard has been calling family members trying to track down the mother and baby.

Grant said Beard has threatened to kill the mother's cousin, who told police she heard the suspect say he bit the baby.

Grant said he has had numerous run-ins with Beard and knows him quite well. He said he is extremely concerned for the safety of the mother, the cousin, the child and the community.

According to the mother, Beard sent her a text message Aug. 16 saying she was not going to be happy with him. The message said he bit the baby on the cheeks.

When the mother came home from work, she said she saw marks on both cheeks. When she took off the baby's long-sleeved shirt the next morning, she discovered two more bite marks on each upper arm.

Grant said the bites on the arms were much more severe than the ones on the cheeks.

Police said it appears the baby was held down by the wrists and shoulders and then bitten "very hard" on the upper arms.

Officers told the mother to take the baby to the hospital for treatment.

Grant said he knew from past involvement with Beard that it would be "impossible to bring him in for an interview."

Grant said Beard has "a violent criminal history" with township police, which involves injuring an officer while resisting arrest, and fleeing and eluding, damage to police property and domestic violence charges.

According to police reports, Beard has faced charges in Taylor, Ecorse and River Rouge for numerous offenses, including aggravated assault, receiving and concealing stolen property and fleeing and eluding police.

Grant told The News-Herald Newspapers on Thursday that Beard called him at about 3 p.m. Tuesday. He said Beard admitted to biting the baby, but offered an explanation.

The lieutenant said he urged Beard to turn himself in, but he refused.

"He said he was not going to prison and he was not giving up his daughter," Grant said.

Beard's comments to Grant are included in police reports on the incident.

According to a report, Beard was irate and told Grant: "I bit her fat. I was just (expletive deleted) playing with her. I bit her on the face and I bit her on the arms just (expletive deleted) playing with her. She's a fat little baby. I just got her out of the bathtub and I bit her, but I didn't mean to hurt her. She bruises easy."

According to the report, Beard said he was not going to surrender and hung up the telephone.

Grant said Beard went to his scheduled probation hearing in Lincoln Park on Tuesday. Township police found out about the hearing and raced there to arrest him.

"He must have found out there was a possible warrant for him because he left," acting Police Chief James Sclater said. "We just missed him."

Sclater said he is sure the community will offer assistance in helping find Beard due to the nature of the injuries to the baby.

Police in Ecorse, Lincoln Park and River Rouge have been asked to be on the lookout for Beard. He is believed to be on foot because he does not have transportation and might still be in the area.

Anyone who spots Beard is asked to call Brownstown police at 1-734-675-1300.

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— THE — ANN ARBOR NEWS

Dead baby's identity remains a mystery Body found behind motel in March

Saturday, August 25, 2007

BY SUSAN L. OPPAT

News Staff Reporter

He was born in March, weighing just over 5 pounds and under 20 inches long. He had dark fuzz on his head.

But he's lain in a small box in the freezer at the morgue for more than five months, unclaimed by someone who wrapped him in layers of baby wipes, a white Hanes T-shirt and a black medium-sized Southpole sweatshirt.

He was stuffed in a plastic grocery bag and left behind an Ypsilanti Township motel in 28-degree weather last March. He was nearly full-term, according to his autopsy.

Soon, the state of Michigan will likely pay \$45 to have his body cremated. His ashes may go on a shelf somewhere.

Because no one knows who he was. Who he'll never be.

He is Baby Boy Doe, case No. 07-199.

Washtenaw County Sheriff's detectives have followed up on every tip, and checked with local school officials, looking for young women who might have been pregnant around that time - all with no luck, Cmdr. Dave Egeler said. He said the baby's DNA is about to be tested against DNA samples in a state database.

The county Medical Examiner's autopsy report noted the infant's umbilical cord was still attached, so he was apparently abandoned almost immediately after birth, said Roger Simpson, chief medical examiner investigator.

It's not clear how long his body was behind the motel, but it could have been a few days or as much as a week.

Mike Dziak, manager of Motel Manor on East Michigan Avenue in Ypsilanti Township, found the baby's body on March 19.

He assumed the bundle was trash left under the evergreen tree next to a fence. He quickly realized something was inside when he looked more closely and saw a baby's foot.

"I was kneeling by that time and saw a hand, and it started to register," Dziak said.

Medical Examiner Bader Cassin said Baby Boy Doe is the only baby whose body has gone unclaimed in Cassin's 12 years on the job.

Simpson said officials will have to dispose of the body because they simply won't be able to store it anymore.

"But adults take more space than this little guy does, and we've been reluctant to go through the process ... in case something comes up," Simpson said. "We're just kind of hoping somebody would step up and we could put a name to the body. It doesn't look that that will happen, but who knows?"

Anyone with information on the case is asked to call the sheriff's department at 734-971-8400 or the confidential tip line at 734-973-7711.

Susan Oppat can be reached at soppat@annarbornews.com or
at 734-482-1166.

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Article published Aug 27, 2007

Newly-built Child Advocacy Center to open in September

By SHANNON MURPHY
Times Herald

Officials with the St. Clair County Child Abuse/ Neglect Council expect to start using their newly constructed Child Advocacy Center in the next month.

The center on Military Street in Port Huron - which also houses the council's new headquarters - was completed at the end of June, said Executive Director Sally Straffon.

Since then, employees have been decorating the two rooms that will be used to interview children who have been sexually abused.

The rooms were decorated in bright colors with plenty of toys for children to play with while there.

Local police agencies, the county prosecutor's office and staff from the state Department of Human Services will be able to use the rooms to interview children in a safe environment.

A trained interviewer was hired by the council to conduct the talks. Local agencies will be able to watch and listen to the conversation from a separate room. They also will be able to ask questions through the interviewer, who will be wearing an earpiece connected to a microphone.

"We are here to serve the professionals who are investigating these matters," Straffon said.

Currently, most police agencies conduct interviews at police stations, which can be intimidating for children, said Port Huron police Detective Marcy Kuehn.

"We're very excited," she said. "Before we had to bring the kids here and they had to sit in the same waiting room that sex offenders have to come through to register.

"This is a very inviting, uplifting atmosphere for a child."

Child advocacy centers are not uncommon; there are about 30 of them around the state, said Nancy Szlezzyngier, program director for the council. She helped research the idea of a center here and coordinated the effort.

The council does not know how many children will be interviewed at the center.

"There's a need here," Szlezzyngier said. "There's no question there's an absolute need."

The center also will help at trial by reducing the number of times a child is interviewed and has to relive a painful experience, officials said.

"There's a lot of secrecy and denial in sexual abuse cases," Szlezzyngier said. "This kind of facility can make that whole process less traumatic for the children and more efficient for the investigating agency."

MIRS 8/22/07

DCH/Children Advocacy Groups Announce Settlement

The state Department of Community Health (DCH) and children's advocacy groups today announced an agreement that settles an eight-year old lawsuit brought under federal Medicaid law.

"We welcome this settlement as an opportunity to improve the delivery of medical and dental care to more than one million children in the state enrolled in Medicaid," said Janet **OLSZEWSKI**, director of Community Health. "Our top priority continues to be ensuring that low-income children in Michigan have access to the very best medical care Michigan has to offer."

The lawsuit was first filed in 1999 and was brought by the Michigan Chapter of American Academy of Pediatricians, the Michigan Chapter of the American Association of Pediatric Dentists, Westside Mothers (an organization of Detroit-area mothers), Families on the Move (an advocacy group for foster care families) and several individual children and their families.

The plaintiffs asserted that the state Medicaid program did not meet federal requirements for state Medicaid programs for children. State officials denied the allegations, but agreed to settle the case to avoid the cost and distraction of litigation and to further the shared goal of improving children's access to medical services.

Jennifer **CLARKE**, lead counsel for the advocacy groups, hailed the settlement as "an opportunity for advocates and MDCH to work collaboratively, using the data to obtain more resources for better care."

State officials also agreed to collect and give advocates detailed information regarding access to medical and dental care as well as the care that children are actually receiving. They also agreed to ongoing consultation with the advocates to improve children's access to health care and dental services. Under the settlement, DCH will expand the Michigan Care Improvement

Registry (MCIR) to include the mandated checkups and screenings actually received by children.

In 2006, while the lawsuit was pending, the state increased its rates for certain children's medical and dental services by 47 percent. Dr. Sheila **GAHAGAN**, president of the Michigan Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatricians, stated that the settlement, which protects the 2006 funding increases, is "an important step to ensuring that enough doctors are available to meet all of the need."

The state and advocates have appointed designees who will monitor the settlement agreement and be the principal contact for issues associated with the lawsuit. Michigan also agreed to pay \$25,000 a year for the next three years to help compensate the advocates' chosen designee.

Advocates have named Dr. Charles **BARONE**, chair of the Department of Pediatrics, Henry Ford Health Services to serve in that capacity. The state has chosen Neil **OPPENHEIMER**, assistant to the director of the Medical Services Administration of DCH, to serve as its designee.

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Article published Aug 27, 2007

Infant deaths on the rise in Calhoun County

Elizabeth Huff

The Enquirer

Megan Beronja kept the seven outfits her son, Colten, wore the week that he was home alive with her.

He was born about six weeks premature and stayed 19 days at Bronson Methodist Hospital's neonatal intensive care unit in Kalamazoo, where his 29-year-old mother visited daily to feed and care for her first child.

Colten was sent home with high hopes, but seven days later, he stopped breathing. Beronja, of Battle Creek, said he died of late-onset meningitis, an infection he contracted from her that went undetected.

He died on March 25, 2004 — one of 18 infants who died in Calhoun County that year.

Calhoun County had a higher rate of infant mortality than the state average between 2003 and 2005. A fetal and infant mortality review team counts babies who die within their first year. They do not investigate miscarriage or stillborn cases because there are too many for their team to investigate, said Genessa Doolittle, who heads the program.

Last year, there were 16 total infant deaths in the county, but already this year the number of confirmed deaths has jumped to 20.

"It's very disturbing to see the numbers in Michigan and this side of the state, if you think of all the efforts that have gone in by organizations to prevent them," said Sandra Hart, director of women's and children's services at Bronson Methodist Hospital.

On an infant's death certificate, the cause may be listed as prematurity or asphyxiation, but there are few specific answers about why babies die in their first year of life.

Health officials track factors such as sexually transmitted infections, substance abuse, age and health of the mother, and prenatal care in hopes of finding a common thread in order to prevent more deaths.

"We do have years that, for whatever reason, go up or go down," said Dottie-Kay Bowersox, health officer for the Calhoun County Department of Public Health. "Sometimes you can find an explanation for it, and sometimes you can't."

The sudden spike in infant deaths this year does not have health officials worried yet, but they would be concerned if the trend continued to rise during the next three to five years, she said.

There were 26 infant deaths in 2001 in Calhoun County, for example, but there were 15 deaths in 2000 and another 15 in 2002, according to the state Department of Community Health.

By looking at the number of fetal and infant deaths, a community can get an idea of how healthy its people are overall. When the numbers are high, it is cause for concern not just for those families who lost a child, but for the whole community.

"The health and welfare of your children represent the health and welfare of your adults," Bowersox said.

A mother's and father's health before becoming pregnant has a lot to do with the baby's health. Poor people who may not have had adequate nutrition and medical care throughout their lives are less likely to have babies that thrive.

"If the only health care you ever get is an immunization growing up, that may not have made you adequate to be ready to carry a pregnancy," said Muriel Crow, nurse practitioner for the county health department.

In this county, more than half of infants who died last year had one or both parents who were a racial minority.

"It seems like non-white women tend to have a higher incidence of infant mortality, and we don't know why," Hart said. "That's why it's such an elusive thing to try to impact."

Asphyxiation, however, continues to be a leading cause of death, and in most cases can be prevented.

The Maternal and Infant Health Commission in Calhoun County works to improve women's health and prenatal care and to reduce infant mortality. Members have worked specifically to prevent death from suffocation by forming the Calhoun County Infant Safe Sleep Coalition.

Last year the group began distributing free portable playpens to parents who cannot afford a crib. They teach expecting parents to take all loose blankets and toys out of their child's sleep area, to use a tight fitting sheet over a firm mattress and to have the baby sleep on his or her back.

Despite these efforts, the rate remains higher than the state's.

"It's such a complex issue," Hart said. "Pregnancy is a time that the mom's health is so important to the baby's health, and even then, it's not a predictor. I think sometimes women think, 'If I do all the right things, I'll have a positive outcome.'"

It's not always in their control, but it will change their lives forever.

"Usually you don't go back to a normal state," said Jennifer Burns, a certified grief counselor and labor and delivery nurse at Oaklawn Hospital in Marshall. "Your life changes after a miscarriage or loss of an infant. You go to a new normal."

Beronja, who is now 32 and about 10 weeks pregnant with a second child, said she sent her first child's seven outfits away to be made into a teddy bear that bares his name and his memory.

"I got it, opened it and cried," she said. "It was just a way for me to remember what he was like the seven days that he was with me."

His birth date, death date and big holidays are the hardest for her, but with the support from a group at Bronson Methodist Hospital she understands that she is not alone in her sorrow.

She has hope and confidence that her next child will live a full and healthy life now that her physicians know they will have to treat her child for possible infections after he or she is born.

Elizabeth Huff can be reached at 966-0684 or ehuff@battlecr.gannett.com.

Detroit Free Press

Wayne County news briefs

August 26, 2007

Assisted-living facility residents to be moved

Residents of the Park Plaza assisted-living facility must be moved because the Michigan Department of Human Services office of Children and Adult Licensing has revoked the facility's license, effective Thursday.

The emergency action was taken after a recent investigation of complaints. The facility at 2560 Second Ave. was issued a license to operate in December 2003.

The investigation found violations of the Public Health Code, the DHS said. Details were not available, and it was not immediately known how many residents live there.

A call to the facility's administrator, Marsha McBain, was not immediately returned.



Boy, 11, charged in shooting

Saturday, August 25, 2007

ALLEGAN COUNTY -- An 11-year-old Casco Township boy accused of shooting and wounding his 10-year-old brother was being held in the county juvenile detention center, authorities said. The shooting happened Thursday and the victim's wounds are not considered life-threatening, Lt. Scott Matice said. The 10-year-old was being treated at a Kalamazoo hospital. Police did not release the circumstances of the shooting, or any other details of the investigation.

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ourMidland.com
from the Midland Daily News

08/22/2007

Youths in custody for school damage

By [Ralph E. Wirtz](#) and [Kelly Dame](#)

Police believe they have caught two of the three youths seen biking away from a vandalized school early Sunday morning.

"Detectives have three juvenile suspects," said Midland Police Chief Jim St. Louis this morning, adding two — both 15-year-old Midland boys — have been taken to the Midland County Juvenile Care Center.

The third, age 13, is a stepbrother to one of the older boys and lives out of town, St. Louis said. Arrangements are being made with his parents to return to boy to Midland.

The vandalism, which caused approximately \$100,000 damage to three buildings at Midland Public Schools, won't delay the opening of school, the district's new superintendent said Tuesday.

"It will not have any effect," Carl Ellinger said. "We've had to reshuffle some custodians from one school to another, but we should have the main items done by the end of the week. But it could be time spent in other places."

It's a shame, he said, because "at this time of year the schools look so pristine."

The trio of vandals early Sunday morning went berserk first at Carpenter Elementary, then at Eastlawn Elementary and then at Central Intermediate, Ellinger said, breaking windows, destroying equipment, discharging fire extinguishers and breaking fixtures and lights from walls. Witnesses reported seeing them biking away from Eastlawn at 4:21 a.m.

At Central, the vandals invaded both floors and the kitchen, throwing theater lights off the auditorium catwalk and destroying a piano and drums that were there awaiting a dress rehearsal Monday evening.

Ellinger said the intruders didn't appear to be rushed.

"The damage was random and it didn't appear that they were rushed or concerned about getting caught," Ellinger said.

The major damage was in three areas — glass breakage, water damage and technology destruction. He said wood floors were bunched in spots at Carpenter Elementary from the water damage, caused when the vandals pulled water faucets off the walls, and that carpets in the schools are being cleaned with a deodorizer.

The district has a \$10,000 deductible, so the financial hit won't be too big to the district, but "it's \$10,000 that could be better spent elsewhere."

Anyone with information is asked to call Midland City Police detectives at (989) 631-4244 or Crime Stoppers at 1-800-422-JAIL.

A play, "Clue — The Musical" by GMS Arts Education, will be shown as scheduled in the Central auditorium. It will begin at 7 p.m. Thursday and Friday nights.

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Probate Judge an advocate for juvenile code reform

By Matt Whetstone, Cadillac News

CADILLAC — Terminating a parent's rights can be the most difficult thing in the world.

It's a reality that judges and those who work in child services face daily.

The current Michigan Juvenile Code often makes termination the default option and it's led to a major increase in unadoptable children since legislation amended the code more than a decade ago.

Wexford County Probate Judge Kenneth L. Tacoma is part of a growing effort asking the legislature to consider reforming the code to prevent so many terminations and reverse the increasing growth of state wards.

"The law focused on parents," said Tacoma, who along with Michigan Supreme Court Justice Maura Corrigan testified before the Michigan Senate. "There's been a huge surge in kids where parental rights have been terminated."

The goal for the Permanency Options Work Group is to make sure before parental rights are terminated that consideration is given to the child and the potential for adoption or foster care, Tacoma said.

Locally, Lake County has the highest number of state wards with 21. A child becomes a state ward when parental rights have been terminated and the child is unadoptable.

Wexford County has 16; Missaukee has five; and Osceola has four. Statewide, there are 6,246 state wards, according to the Michigan Department of Human Services.

"We're having a lot more kids in the system than 10 years ago," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, a senior research associate with the Michigan League of Human Services. "We've roughly doubled the number of kids that are state wards. That puts tremendous pressure on the (DHS) because we don't know what to do with all the kids."

Tacoma's work group has proposed legislation that could soon be introduced by a group of state senators. One key component is to stem the tide of parental terminations where there is no likelihood of adoption, he said.

"Locally, the Department of Human Services office is very sensitive to that problem but the law forces them into a termination of parental rights," Tacoma said.

As an example, the code makes termination the mandated case plan if a child remains in foster care for one year after initial placement. The only way to reverse that mandate is by showing it is "clearly not in the child's best interest," which is a nearly impossible task for parents, the child or the DHS, Tacoma said.

Michigan isn't the only state grappling with counterproductive laws. A federal law has similar affects in many states. In California, Tacoma said lawmakers passed legislation that allows children to petition the courts to return to their parents.

Oftentimes, Tacoma said once a child ages out of the system — usually at 18 years old — the now teenager will seek his or her birth parents.

"It shows the state has not done well preparing the child for life," Tacoma said.

A high percentage of teens end up in jail or prison as well, he said.

Without a steady family background, Zehnder-Merrell said it doubles the risk the teen will become a high school dropout. About half of girls that age out of the system end up having children and half of the total teens won't have a job in a few years.

It can create a vicious cycle.

Many times, parental rights are terminated because of extreme substance abuse and more often it has become methamphetamine, Tacoma said. Another common reason is a young mother who is trying to raise the child without the child's father. Boyfriends often enter the picture and the pair will mistreat the child, Tacoma said.

"It breaks your heart when you hear what these kids have to go through," Tacoma said. "It's really hard to see kids that start life way, way, way, way on the bottom — from the day they're born."

Thinking the solution will get fixed overnight is a mistake because of the state's financial situation, Zehnder-Merrell said. A number of state cuts over the last few years have affected programs that are designed to aid foster care families. The cuts come at a time when funding is needed more than ever, she said.

"The state has made a lot of decisions with DHS that has aggravated the problem," she said.

Namely, early retirements have taken a lot of veteran employees from the department.

"We're asking people without experience to go out and make life or death decisions about parents," she said. "Put yourself in their position. Would you rather error for safety or take the chance kids could get hurt?"

Your Local Connection

Time for reform?

In a piece entitled "Lost and alone on some forgotten highway..." Wexford County Probate Court Judge Kenneth L. Tacoma outlines the Michigan Juvenile Code and reforms he and others are advocating.

- Law: The "one year rule" makes termination of parental rights the default option and the termination is mandated if the child remains in foster care for one year after initial placement.
- Reform: The "one year rule" should be modified or eliminated so the system does not approach a case as "one year and out."
- Law: The law creates a presumption in favor of termination "unless the courts find termination of parental rights to the child is clearly not in the child's best interest," which is a nearly impossible standard for parents, the child or the Department of Human Services.
- Reform: The state should be held to the same burden by proving by clear and convincing evidence that termination is in the best interests of the child rather than shift the burden to the parents.
- Law: The law removing the discretion of professionals continues pressure for more termination cases and results in more permanent state wards.
- Reform: The system needs to expand alternatives to the litigation beyond the termination of parental rights.

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Expanded Eaton youth facility will open soon

By ALAN MILLER
Lansing Community Newspapers

CHARLOTTE — Nearly three years ago, Eaton County voters agreed to tax themselves to pay for expanded juvenile justice programs.

Some of the proceeds from the 0.4-mill levy are being used to financed programs, but most of the funding was used to double the size of the county's juvenile justice facility in Charlotte, which county officials hope will save the county money and at the same time improve the effort to help troubled youth.

With construction complete on the \$2.1 million, 14,000-square-foot addition, and final inspections for their occupancy permit done, officials are awaiting only the delivery of furniture, scheduled for next week, to begin using the new space probably the first week of September.

The facility will house two new programs — day treatment to allow up to 24 convicted youth offenders to spend their days receiving counseling and educational programs while sleeping at home, and a residential community treatment program for eight young people who are not security risks, but are in need of safe housing to live while learning skills to live on their own in the community.

Court administrator Michael Kutas said the facilities will allow youthful offenders now in state custody to return to Eaton County. It will also provide a wider range of options to deal with youth who are not a threat to themselves or others, and are not flight risks.

Eaton County Probate Judge Michael Skinner said he is very excited about the new facility and the additional options it will give the courts.

"The number-one difference," he said, "is I'll be able to have more frequent contact with the juveniles, because they'll be local. The court can have a closer supervision and be more closely involved with their progress."

The second advantage Skinner cited is his belief that juveniles kept in their own community are easier to rehabilitate, because they are closer to family and friends, "and that gives us a lot of options."

"In remote locations, parents can't visit as often, and those kids lose touch and feel isolated when they are that far away," he said.

Finally, Skinner pointed to the cost savings. In state placement, he said the county is paying as much as \$275 per day — more than \$8,000 a month — for state placements, which can be less effective than local treatment options.

Educational services for youth in the facility will be provided through a contract between the county and Charlotte Public Schools.

The school district will provide three teachers, support staff and educational materials at a cost estimated to be less than \$40,000, because the district will receive the state aid for the 42 students in the facility.

Prevention efforts

In addition to construction and operation of the facility, the tax revenue will allow the county to expand prevention programs.

The TIP (Truancy Intervention Program) operates through the Eaton Intermediate School District, and targets students who are habitually absent from school.

Using chronic school absences as an early indicator of family problems, school officials identify students in need of intervention.

As the program is described by the intermediate school district, TIP holds parents accountable, while giving students the education, assessment, and services they need to address the underlying causes of their truancy.

Local school districts may refer truant students aged 6 to 14 to the intermediate school district.

In most cases, the referral generates a truancy hearing at Juvenile Court.

The court requires the parent or guardian and student to participate in the age appropriate TIP program until the attendance problem is resolved. Failure to do so can result in more formal court involvement.

The millage also finances a "zero to five" program to offer parent education classes to potentially at-risk parents of young children in the county.

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Get involved with groups that keep kids on right track

EDITORIAL

Too often, we hear sad stories about area youths who have ended up on the wrong side of the law, or they've been victims of abuse, become addicted to drugs or even worse.

The frequent question many of us ponder is: How could these misfortunes have been prevented?

That's why Oakland County residents should be applauding and, if possible, contributing to the efforts of groups who work with youths to prevent them from taking the route of crime, drug abuse or truancy or from making other negative choices.

One of these groups, Oakland County Youth Assistance, offers a variety of services to Oakland County families, including counseling, family assessment, substance abuse assessment, parenting classes, mentoring, skill-building and camp scholarships, recreation programs and tutoring.

From its beginnings in Hazel Park in 1953, the program has grown tremendously. There are now 26 local Youth Assistance offices in the county.

The group has an admirable goal: "The overall mission is delinquency, neglect and abuse prevention through community involvement," says Mary Schusterbauer, chief of Oakland County Youth Assistance.

More than 1,000 volunteers already contribute to the group's efforts each year reaching out to both the youths and their families.

But there are many areas where the public's help is still needed.

"Primarily, we're looking for mentors. We always need more mentors, especially men," Schusterbauer says, adding that people can also help send kids to camp, plan parenting classes or do other things for the organization.

The importance of mentoring cannot be overestimated.

Many youths do not have an adult figure in their life who is there to explain to them about right and wrong or just listen to them when they have a problem or want to share an experience.

For some of these children, having a positive mentor could mean the difference between a trip to prison and a trip to college.

It all boils down to the old argument about prevention versus punishment.

Those who would question the urgency of providing positive role models and other assistance for at-risk children fail to realize that everybody pays when youths become criminals.

"Whatever happens to children in our society affects all of us. Getting involved on the front end can prevent kids from going into the juvenile justice system," Schusterbauer says. "It costs less to intervene with kids earlier rather than deal with them in the justice system."

Residents who have contributed to this program's noble mission are setting a positive example for the community. The same praise goes to those who have helped other groups with similar positive goals, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, as well as Mentor Michigan. The more people who choose to get involved with groups like these, the better off our communities will be. If our volunteer efforts can save even one child from a life of crime or drug abuse and put them on the right track, then none of our time will have been wasted.

To volunteer for Oakland County Youth Assistance or learn more about the organization, call (248) 858-0041.

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Michigan Report

August 24, 2007

NEARLY HALF OF CHILD SUPPORT ARREARAGE CASES 15 YEARS OLD OR MORE

Nearly 50 percent of the arrearage cases in Michigan are 15 years or older and 76 percent of those cases involve debtors with annual incomes of \$10,000 or less, according to a study of the state's child support system that included eight other states.

Marilyn Stephen, director of the Office of Child Support in the Department of Human Services, shared findings from the unpublished Urban Institute review with Gongwer News Service as it looked at how arrearages have grown over the past 10 years.

A high dollar amount in arrearages and a low income are directly correlated, she said, though some people are making more money than it appears because they work in a cash economy or have an employer that doesn't report all of the person's income.

"The trick is to figure out who can pay," she said.

Michigan stood out amongst the eight other states studied in terms of the age of cases, but Ms. Stephen argued that much of that is because the state has been doing more in the area of collecting child support arrearages, and for a longer period of time than most other states.

While having cases that are 15 or more years old means that child support payments could be due for a person who is now an adult, Ms. Stephen said that money is still owed to the custodial parent. However, due to a statute of limitations, parents who have not paid child support for 10 years past the date his or her child turns 18-years-old can ask the court to extinguish their debt, Ms. Stephen said. But if payments were made by pulling money from a person's federal income tax return, then the statute of limitations

stops, she said.

Ms. Stephen estimated that because a statewide computer system came online in 2003, old cases will likely begin coming off in 2013 as friend of the court officials no longer have to go back and forth between new and old systems to check whether people are paying child support or not. The state currently has 958,000 child support cases and 750,000 court ordered cases.

The study also found that 30 percent of the arrearage caseload involves a parent who does not reside in Michigan. DHS works with other states through uniform jurisdictional guidelines to collect arrearages.

Child support arrearages have grown from \$3.4 billion in 1996 to \$9.099 billion in the first three quarters of 2007.

The growth is due to a number of factors, though most of it deals with the surcharge and compounding that was added to child support arrearages that were retroactive to 1996, but became law in 1998, Ms. Stephen said.

From 1998 to 1999, arrearages grew from \$3 billion (after being at \$2.8 billion in 1997) to nearly \$6 billion. From 2000 to 2001, arrearages grew by \$790 million, while between 2002 and 2003 that growth was \$663 million.

In 2004, arrearages totaled \$8.6 billion, up from the just over \$8 billion reported in 2003. By 2005, the number had grown to \$8.9 billion. However, since then, total arrearages have clocked in at nearly \$9.1 billion annually.

While other states have seen increased collections as their local economies, with Michigan's unemployment rate the highest in the nation, friend of the court officials here have dealt with a tougher collection environment, but Ms. Stephens said the department is proud that it has been able to maintain collection numbers and slow the growth of the arrearages.

That growth has also been slowed by the new laws that eliminated the compounding and reduced the surcharge on arrearages to 4 percent and tied it to the T-bill. The department can now also waive all arrearage surcharges if the parent has stayed current with child support payments to

the family for six months. Judges can also waive some surcharges if a parent has entered into a payment plan.

Attorney General Mike Cox has also focused on arrearage collections, though his department only deals with about 1 percent of the child support cases in the state. Since 2003, the department has collected \$44 million in arrearages, a spokesperson for the attorney general said.

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Article published Aug 26, 2007

'Walk a Mile' charity event a hit once again - with photo gallery

By Kristofer Karol

DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

Steve Schuknecht says nobody better make fun of his pair of size 14 pink heels.

"Anybody that wants to make fun of me risks the chance of getting roped in," joked Schuknecht, an assistant general manager at the Tanger Outlet Center at Kensington Valley in Howell Township.

Schuknecht was referring to LACASA's "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes" event, which, on Saturday, featured dozens of men who donned heels, dresses and other feminine attire at the outlet center to raise awareness of domestic violence in the community.

Howell Township-based LACASA provides domestic violence, child abuse and sexual assault services to victims and their families and friends.

"It's just trying to raise awareness to help people feel comfortable about issues they don't normally talk about," Shewach said of the second annual event. "It's just to let people know it's really OK to talk about."

Last year's event raised slightly less than \$13,000 — figures for this year's walk weren't immediately available Saturday.

But the event, which was emceed by WDIV's Steve Garagiola, appeared to be a hit — even with the rainy weather outside.

The scene prior to the walk inside the food court was surreal, as men chatted with each other about what kind of shoes they were wearing.

Vince Linder, a provost at Cleary University who won the "I'm All That" award prior to the walk, was decked out in a fuzzy red and white hat, red socks, a yellow skirt with polka dots, yellow purse and shoes with fake flowers on them.

Linder said his wife teaches theater, which explains why he was in the get-up.

"My house is like a theater shop," Linder said. "So, we go in there and pull out purses and say 'Oh, that looks good.' "

"I'm a little worried because Vince has all that stuff in his closet," ribbed Cleary University President Tom Sullivan.

Brighton's Bill Bradfield had knee-high black boots on and was making his second appearance at "Walk a Mile."

"I think it's just an excellent reminder that domestic violence still exists," Bradfield said.

Some participants are already formulating plans for next year, such as Putnam Township Assistant Fire Chief Rodney Humble, who complemented his flip flops with mini-boas with his fire helmet and overalls.

"There are eight fire departments in Livingston County," Humble said. "My goal is to have representatives from each department here next year."

Contact Daily Press & Argus reporter Kristofer Karol at (517) 552-2835 or at kkarol@gannett.com.



Bill would delay tax breaks for poor because of budget ills

8/26/2007, 10:03 a.m. ET

By **DAVID EGGERT**
The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Aline Anderson's job as a church receptionist in Flint barely pays enough to cover the basics — rent, food, clothing, utilities.

"There aren't many extras," says the 58-year-old mother of four who has two teenage children living at home. "When I say extras, I mean going to a movie or trying to take a vacation. Those things are very difficult."

This year, though, Anderson's family got help when she became aware of the federal earned income tax credit, or EITC, a break that gives back up to \$4,700 to low-income workers.

"It was just a godsend for me," says Anderson, who was able to buy a car to get to work. Her husband cannot work because of health problems.

Anderson stands to get even more help if a new state income tax credit similar to the federal credit takes effect in January as planned. But she's worried that the potential state refund could be jeopardized by a shortfall of at least \$1.6 billion the state faces in the budget year that starts Oct. 1.

Republican Sen. Nancy Cassis, R-Novi, has introduced legislation that would keep Michigan's earned income tax credit from going into effect until the state's nearly depleted rainy day fund is much healthier. She says Michigan cannot afford to lose \$290 million a year in tax revenue when the credit is fully phased in.

"We are not repealing or taking one penny from anyone," says Cassis, chairwoman of the Senate Finance Committee and the lawmaker who sponsored the 2006 bill putting the state earned income tax credit in place. "It's just holding off on implementing it until we're on a more sure economic footing."

Although some Republicans have signed onto the delay, her bill faces stiff opposition from Democrats who control the state House.

It also is being criticized by backers of the new tax break, some of whom pushed for two decades to get the state EITC in place. They say Cassis' proposal is appalling.

"After all of the tax cuts we give everyone else like businesses and wealthier individuals, we shouldn't be balancing the budget on the backs of working families," says Sharon Parks, vice president for public policy at the Lansing-based Michigan League for Human Services.

An earned income tax credit increases what low-wage workers earn by refunding payroll and income taxes. The amount varies according to income and family size.

Michigan's credit would let low-income workers when they fill out their state income tax forms claim an amount equal to 10 percent of the federal credit in the 2008 tax year and 20 percent in 2009 and after.

For a single mother raising two children, working full-time at the \$7.15 minimum wage and making \$14,872 annually, the Michigan credit would be \$478 in the first year.

A study by the Washington-based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities shows that Michigan was one of just six states in 2006 that taxed two-income families of four with incomes below \$15,500 — a quarter below the federal poverty level. That family would have had to pay \$242 in state taxes earlier this year since the state EITC doesn't take effect until next year.

Parks says Michigan's tax structure already hurts the working poor because it charges a flat income tax instead of a graduated one. Under the flat tax, all taxpayers — whether they make \$20,000 a year or \$200,000 — pay the same 3.9 percent rate on income after exemptions are figured in.

Last week, Parks' group sent letters to senators estimating the number of taxpayers in each of their districts who would be eligible to claim the state earned income tax credit if it takes effect as planned. Lawmakers also were told the average refund their low-income constituents could get.

Overall, about 600,000 households in Michigan filed for the federal credit in the 2004 tax year, the last year data is available. At least that many could be eligible for the state tax credit next year.

Sen. Mike Prusi, D-Ispheming, says the new credit should stay.

The proposed bill would effectively stop the credit from taking effect for "years and years and years," Prusi says, because it requires the budget stabilization fund — also known as the rainy day fund — to have \$250 million in reserves, something that last occurred in 2001, when the state's economy was more robust.

"These people are the ones who will turn around and put (the tax credit) right back into our economy, whether it's \$150, \$200, \$300," says Prusi. "They'll turn around and buy school clothes for their kids."

Cassis says there still would be other help for low-income people if the state tax credit is delayed, such as the federal earned income tax break, cash assistance, Medicaid and food stamps.

Cassis says she is mindful of the needs of low-income residents, but "there are a dozen to two dozen other special interests that would say, 'We need some relief as well.'"

Anderson, though, says tax credits add to her family's quality of life. She earns just a hair more than the minimum wage at the Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle in Flint and says every extra dollar helps.

"It's a struggle," Anderson says. "You make it, but it's a struggle."

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The bill that would freeze the state income tax credit is Senate Bill 622.

On the Net:

Michigan Legislature: <http://www.legislature.mi.gov>

Michigan League for Human Services: <http://www.milhs.org>

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08/26/2007

Now that \$3 for gas is the norm, drivers and businesses face a ...

Hard Road Ahead

By **MARTA HEPLER DRAHOS**
Record-Eagle staff writer

TRAVERSE CITY — When gas hit \$3 a gallon in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, most Americans took a wait-and-see attitude before re-thinking their driving habits.

Now that it appears the \$3 gallon is here to stay, many of those same people are making lasting changes. And nowhere is that more apparent than in northern Michigan, which saw some of the highest gasoline prices in the country — \$4.16 a gallon on Beaver Island — in May.

"There has been a shift in business," said Janice Peppo, owner of Sleepy Bear Campground in Empire with her husband, Jim. "Before, we'd get oodles of reservations in May, way ahead. Now they're going week by week to make sure they can come. They're scared to make it ahead of time, with the fluctuation in gas prices. And the people who used to come for a weekend now stay a week."

Peppo said the steady rise in gas prices has also affected staffing at the 200-site family campground, which hires "work campers" from places like Texas, Arizona and Florida.

"People are (usually) begging to come to Michigan, and this year it's been hard to find help," she said. "And all the reasons were from the gas prices."

While tourism in western Michigan usually increases 3-5 percent annually, it has been flat or has increased by just 1-2 percent each year the last couple of years, said Rick Hert, executive director of the West Michigan Tourist Association. Still, Hert isn't discouraged.

"I'm hearing stability. That pleases me, even with the gas prices," he said. "I'm not seeing increases, I'm not seeing decreases. We're fortunate in western Michigan that we have very tried and true tourism destinations that will always do well. Traverse City is one of them," he added.

Some drivers have responded to sticker shock at the pumps by taking up carpooling or turning to public transportation. Bay Area Transportation Authority ridership was up 6 percent May 1 through July 31 over the same period last year, said BATA operations supervisor Dave Berg.



Record-Eagle/Douglas Tesner

By day Ted Forcier sits behind a desk and drives a a Ford Explorer. In the evening he fires up his his VW Rabbit and goes door-to-door selling reflective address signs. "The rabbit cost me about \$1,000. and I figure it will save me that much in gas in a year. So in a little over a very I will have paid for it in gas savings," said Forcier.

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Others are cutting down on quick trips to the store or buying more fuel-efficient cars — or both.

Misty Sheehan traded her pickup for a mini-SUV to help reduce gas costs. She also cut down on the number of trips she makes to Traverse City from her home in Empire, even dropping out of several church committees that required more frequent commutes.

"I'll go in once a week in the fall, so I'll try to do everything that once a week," said Sheehan, who teaches liberal studies at Grand Valley State University and online courses in Asian studies at the College of DuPage. "But then there's book club, and if I want to go to church ... "

Sheehan, 62, said her goal is to fill up her Honda CRV only once a week — even if it means she has less face-to-face contact with her friends in town.

"When I first came up in 2002, gas was \$1.29. Now it's almost three times that," she said. "When I'm living on a fixed income, that makes a big difference."

Sherry Wild kept her Ford Expedition but bought a scooter for summer. The bright red, 49cc Piaggio not only gets 110 miles a gallon but saves wear and tear on her car, she added.

A youth group leader at Grawn United Methodist Church, Wild, 49, said she drives the scooter everywhere, from her home south of Grawn to the church district office in Traverse City, her sister's house near Karlin and school meetings in Kingsley.

"I put \$2 and 4 cents in it the other day," she said. "If you were to average it all out, it adds up to about \$4 a week. I feel good that I'm not using as much gas — I think that it sets a good example for my kids and shows them not to be afraid to try something just because it's not the norm."

What isn't the norm now may soon change. Since starting a Vespa dealership in May, "things are booming," said Lori Watson, who also owns Nature and Me RV in Traverse City with her husband.

"We definitely see a business fluctuation with gas," she said. "When the gas prices go up, our (Vespa) business goes up. With towns like Traverse City becoming more urban, people are able to run to the grocery store, run to the bank (without) starting up their big car."

While the dealership sells Piaggios and classic Vespas ranging from 50cc to 500cc, Watson said the small mopeds offer riders low-cost registration and step-through and twist-and-go convenience without the hassle and expense of a helmet, insurance, plate or title. Plus they're relatively inexpensive and easy to ride, making them an attractive alternative for people of all ages and genders.

"We just sold one to a woman with hip replacements," she said.

For Maggie Pezzullo, scooters are not an option. The 23-year-old Traverse City woman injured her back while serving in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 and can't afford the gas to Saginaw for extensive rehabilitation at a VA facility.

"It's a three-hour trip to Saginaw," said Pezzullo, who put her treatment on hold after being told she needs three days of physical and chiropractic therapy a week as well as occupational therapy and other care. "It was like, do I want to spend \$100 to \$200 in gas to go to Saginaw or buy groceries? Yes, (the VA) reimburse me, but they reimburse me 11 cents a mile."

Pezzullo isn't the only one for whom affording higher gas costs has been a struggle. The Grand Traverse-

Leelanau Department of Human Services is running low on gas cards to help clients get to work, "and we just heard that message a month ago," said director Mary Marois.

But Marois said higher gasoline prices are just part of a "bigger package" affecting her clients that also includes higher prices for propane and natural gas, and fewer jobs.

"The message I just gave to my board is that by the end of May, we'd spent almost as much money helping people with rent, heat and utilities as we had in all of 2006," she said.

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MORNING SUN

Clare, Montcalm county unemployment among worst in state

By MARK RANZENBERGER
Sun Staff Writer

Montcalm and Clare counties continued to be among the worst places in Michigan to find jobs in July, according to a new report from the Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth.

Those counties continued to suffer double-digit unemployment rates during the month, the report said.

Montcalm County had the state's second-highest unemployment rate during July, at 12.5 percent. Clare County was fourth-highest of the state's 83 counties, at 11.3 percent.

Gratiot County ranked 70th of 83 counties, barely avoiding double digits at 9.6 percent unemployment.

The one bright spot in mid-Michigan was Isabella County, with a rate of 5.7 percent. That was the sixth-best unemployment rate among Michigan counties.

In Clare, Gratiot and Montcalm counties, the unemployment rate was higher than it was in June 2007; it was unchanged in Isabella County.

Compared to July 2006, the unemployment rate in Clare and Gratiot counties was down slightly. Montcalm County's rate was up substantially from the year before, when it was 8.5 percent.

Isabella County's unemployment rate was up over the year. It had been 4.9 percent in July 2006.

Total employment levels – the number of people who actually have jobs – fell in 16 of

Michigan's 17 major labor market areas compared to year-ago levels, the state reported.

The monthly survey of employers indicated that seasonally unadjusted payroll jobs in Michigan fell by 130,000 from June to July to total 4.2 million. Both government and private-sector jobs were affected, as the number of private sector jobs in Michigan declined by 63,000 from June to July.

Over the year, manufacturing, government, construction, and retail trade employment were down in most metropolitan areas, while jobs in health services were up in nearly all regions, according to Rick Waclawek, director of the Bureau of Labor Market Information & Strategic Initiatives.

The state said the size of the work force – the number of people working or actively seeking jobs – also fell in 16 of the 17 labor markets between 2006 and 2007. Statewide, the size of the labor force fell 1.1 percent over the year.

The statewide unemployment rate in July was 7.9 percent, down slightly from July 2006's 8 percent.

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8/27/2007

MIRS 8/22/07

Privatization Stays In Senate DHS Budget

The Senate passed a Department of Human Services (DHS) budget bill that includes the privatization of some foster care, juvenile justice and adoption programs, despite strong opposition from Senate Democrats.

The \$4.516 billion budget is \$67 million less than Gov. Jennifer **GRANHOLM**'s recommendation. The GOP's move ups the privatization of children services from the current 40 percent to 60 percent.

"More services will now be provided by licensed nonprofit, nationally accredited, private agencies," said Sen. Bill **HARDIMAN** (R-Kentwood). "Shifting programs to community-based providers will mean better care for young people. Services will include measurable outcomes and performance expectations that will help achieve high quality results for children and families."

The GOP has argued that allowing nonprofit organizations to provide some of these services will save the state money. But, there's been considerable debate over whether privatization will actually save the department money (See "**Privatization Holding Up DHS Budget**," 5/14/07).

Democrats are not in favor of privatizing these services. This debate is what initially held up the DHS budget.

"The private sector does not have a magic wand to reduce cost," said Sen. Deb **CHERRY** (D-Burton). "Not every venture is profitable, that does not mean it's not worth doing. These companies are out to make a profit and they'll only put the children first if they can make money doing so. That's not how I want my state making decisions."

Sen. Mickey **SWITALSKI** (D-Roseville) said the privatization efforts would eliminate 800 state jobs. Switalski also called the GOP's estimate that caseloads would be reduced by 5,000, "optimistic."

"They are talking about in excess of 5,000 cases being reduced from where we are," he said. "I think that is really pushing and if we don't achieve that level of reductions we'll be looking at mid-year cuts."

Hardiman disagreed. "This is about improving the system for children," he said. "It is not about doing the same things and getting the same result."

The bill (**SB 0232**) passed 22-16. Sen. Cameron **BROWN** (R-Fawn River Twp.) voted no with the Dems and Sens. Jim **BARCIA** (D-Bay City) and Dennis **OLSHOVE** (D-Warren).

Key highlights of **SB 0232** include:

- The Governor had increased Adoption Subsidies caseload by 887 cases, State Disabilities Assistance by 596 cases, and SSI State Supplementation by 3,011 and reduced Family Independence Program (FIP) cases by 6,900 cases and Foster Care by 38 cases. The Senate reduced FIP by 12,136 cases.
- The Governor had recommended 257 new positions for Child Welfare Improvements (CWI) at a cost of \$39.5 million (\$35 million General Fund) and \$18.1 million gross for statewide expansion of the JET (Jobs, Education and Training program). The Senate proposed \$44.7 million gross (\$23.6 million general fund) for private agencies at a net general fund savings of \$23.4 million to CWI.



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Published August 26, 2007

Early out: Senate plan is another gimmick; show where the work vanishes

A Lansing State Journal editorial

Republicans in the Michigan Senate are in hot pursuit of another round of gimmicks to paper over a budget deficit. With an estimated \$1.8 billion hole, the challenge is great.

Senate Majority Leader Mike Bishop's idea: a new incentive to get thousands of state workers to retire early to save as much as \$200 million a year.

The Rochester Republican announced a plan last week that would allow as many as 14,000 of 52,000 state workers to retire. Bishop is modeling his plan after the 2002 early-out scheme advanced by then-Gov. John Engler.

During that "early out," about 4,000 of the 8,000 eligible state workers were expected to take the deal. Instead, 7,500 did - a result that forced the state into rounds of new hiring.

And that's the trick: Eliminating workers does not necessarily eliminate work.

If Michigan had a 2002 repeat, 13,000 workers could take Bishop's offer. That would be a 25 percent cut in the state's work force. Does anyone really believe the state's work load will suddenly drop by 25 percent?

The biggest chunk of the state work force is found in the Department of Corrections, with more than 16,000 classified employees.

Bishop & Co. have been most alarmed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm's prison revamp plans, which they say will jeopardize public safety. But what would happen if lots of corrections officers took a buyout?

DOC has to get smaller, that's clear. But the path to a smaller prison system is in reducing the prison population, not through stretching out the DOC work force.

Some Republicans, such as state Rep. Rick Jones of Grand Ledge, have argued for an early out as an economic stimulus. Older workers retire, and you hire younger, yet cheaper, ones to replace them.

Of course, there's a cost to losing experience, a cost to training so many new workers - and a cost in allowing people to retire younger by giving them an incentive to do so, as Bishop's plan contains.

In essence, this plan is a bid to shrink spending now by adding to costs later - for example, a higher multiplier rate for retirees to calculate their pension.

Now, to be fair, Senate Republicans did pass a series of budget bills last week that cut spending from Gov. Jennifer Granholm's 2008 budget. These total \$163 million, an impressive sum. One reached by some notable moves, though.

Remember the brouhaha in the spring about State Police cutbacks? Well, the Senate GOP's budget plan includes a \$2 million cut in the State Police budget.

That's nothing, though, compared to plans for the Department of Labor and Economic Growth. The Senate budget cuts DLEG spending in half from Granholm's proposal, from \$98 million to \$46 million.

Understand, cutting spending has to be part of any reasonable budget. Citizens can fairly debate where and how much to cut, but cutting is on the table. So, at least the Senate has that bit right in advancing budget cuts for debate.

But throwing forward another early-out plan with incentives to be paid eventually by taxpayers isn't the way to go.

Instead of early outs, Bishop and his allies should sell citizens on what they consider the nonessential state programs that employ the thousands of state workers they believe Michigan can do without.

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Michigan Report

August 24, 2007

UDOW 'IN AWE' OF STAFF AS SHE HEADS FOR THE DOOR

Despite heading a department fraught with staffing and budgetary challenges, as well as dealing with a lawsuit over foster care she wishes the state would have settled, outgoing Department of Human Services Director Marianne Udow said she's not leaving next week bitter about how a lack of funding has stifled her goals. In fact, she says, she is "in awe" over what her staff has managed in spite of its limited resources.

"Lack of staffing is a very serious issue for the department. There are serious morale issues. Caseloads are too high," she said. "Still, it's amazing to me that we've made all of these changes even with limited resources."

Ms. Udow was appointed by Governor Jennifer Granholm in 2004 mainly to develop the Early Childhood Investment Corporation, state investments in children's programs serving kids from birth to five years old modeled after the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, Ms. Udow said.

Since then, she has built a platform at DHS based on children's advocacy, including expanding services to older foster children and creating advisory boards made up of former and current foster children who make recommendations about the system.

Her commitment to children's advocacy means that it's likely something many say she will be most remembered for said Sen. [Bill Hardiman](#) (R-Kentwood), the chair of the DHS Appropriations committee.

"She has a real heart for kids especially," Mr. Hardiman said.

Ms. Udow said leaving a legacy marked by children's rights would be just fine with her.

"That would be wonderful," she said. "I am passionate about making sure that we invest in our children. As a society it is important to make sure we

our children have a great start in life."

Sharon Parks at the League for Human Services said she thinks Ms. Udow will be most known for moving away from the Work First model of "getting a job, any job," and moving toward a "long-term goal of reducing poverty and not just closing someone's welfare case."

"She tried to put things in place that would help people be in a better place after their case closed. She was deeply committed to trying to ensure that the safety net was strong such as basic cash assistance, childcare and food assistance," Ms. Parks said.

Unfortunately, said Ms. Parks, Ms. Udow could only spend the money she was appropriated, and the safety net she built, in part because of less funding and in part because of increased poverty, has slowly eroded.

"(Ms. Udow) has managed a department that has been very much under stress because of the lack of resources with the loss of state employees, making staffing lean. Even with scarce resources she was committed," Ms. Parks said.

Ms. Udow said one of the things she liked most about her department was the nonpartisan nature of the issues she dealt with.

"It wasn't about party, it was just about doing what you thought was best for children and families," she said, adding that she and Mr. Hardiman, a Republican, usually worked very well together.

Added Mr. Hardiman: "We didn't always agree, but on the important points, I think we found agreement."

One issue they don't agree on is privatizing foster care and juvenile services, a proposal that Mr. Hardiman is backing and that he said would improve delivery of services and save the state \$20 million a year.

The department's stance has been that it won't actually save money and that private companies don't necessarily deliver services better than the state.

Improving services in foster care is especially critical, Mr. Hardiman said, as the state tries to negotiate through a lawsuit brought by Children's Rights, a national advocacy group claiming Michigan's foster care system

is sub par.

The issue is so critical to Ms. Udow that recently, a Detroit Free Press columnist said that perhaps she resigned because the state cutoff settlement talks over the suit.

Asked if that's true, Ms. Udow said she "would have loved to have settled that lawsuit before spending other expensive legal fees" but that's not why she's leaving the department.

Making all of the changes in the foster care system to meet the demands of the lawsuit and then leaving before the case is closed might make some bitter, but not instead Ms. Udow said she's left with "admiration and awe for the staff that have worked hard on the case everyday."

"This (job) has been among the most meaningful experiences I've had in my life. To see the courage that the staff has and really to work in public sector, I think it's important for everyone to have an opportunity to do this to see that people who work as public servants really care."

As for what advice she might offer her successor - she's given Ismael Ahmed the five year plan she developed in 2004, to which she said "he has been very receptive" but Ms. Udow said she's leaving it to Mr. Ahmed to blaze his own trail.

"(Mr. Ahmed is) so committed. His mark will be poverty issues. I've told him I'll be helpful or get out of his way. I'm leaving the department in good hands."

Ms. Udow said she can't predict what issues will take on the biggest focus at DHS in Mr. Ahmed's tenure, although his expertise in immigration issues will certainly be helpful as the department looks for ways to address changing immigration laws and their impact on the department's policies.

As for her future, Ms. Udow plans to continue volunteering on several boards while working with University of Michigan/Blue Cross, but perhaps most importantly, she hopes to share the findings from her new venture on a state and national level.

"My hope is that very soon this country is going to be engaged in a very serious conversation about healthcare reform. At U of M we are in a great

position to demonstrate how we can improve the delivery of healthcare. I am fully expecting the work we do to open up the dialogue," she said.